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No. 387

The Singing Soul

A CHINESE PLAY IN ONE ACT

BY

MRS HENRY BACKUS

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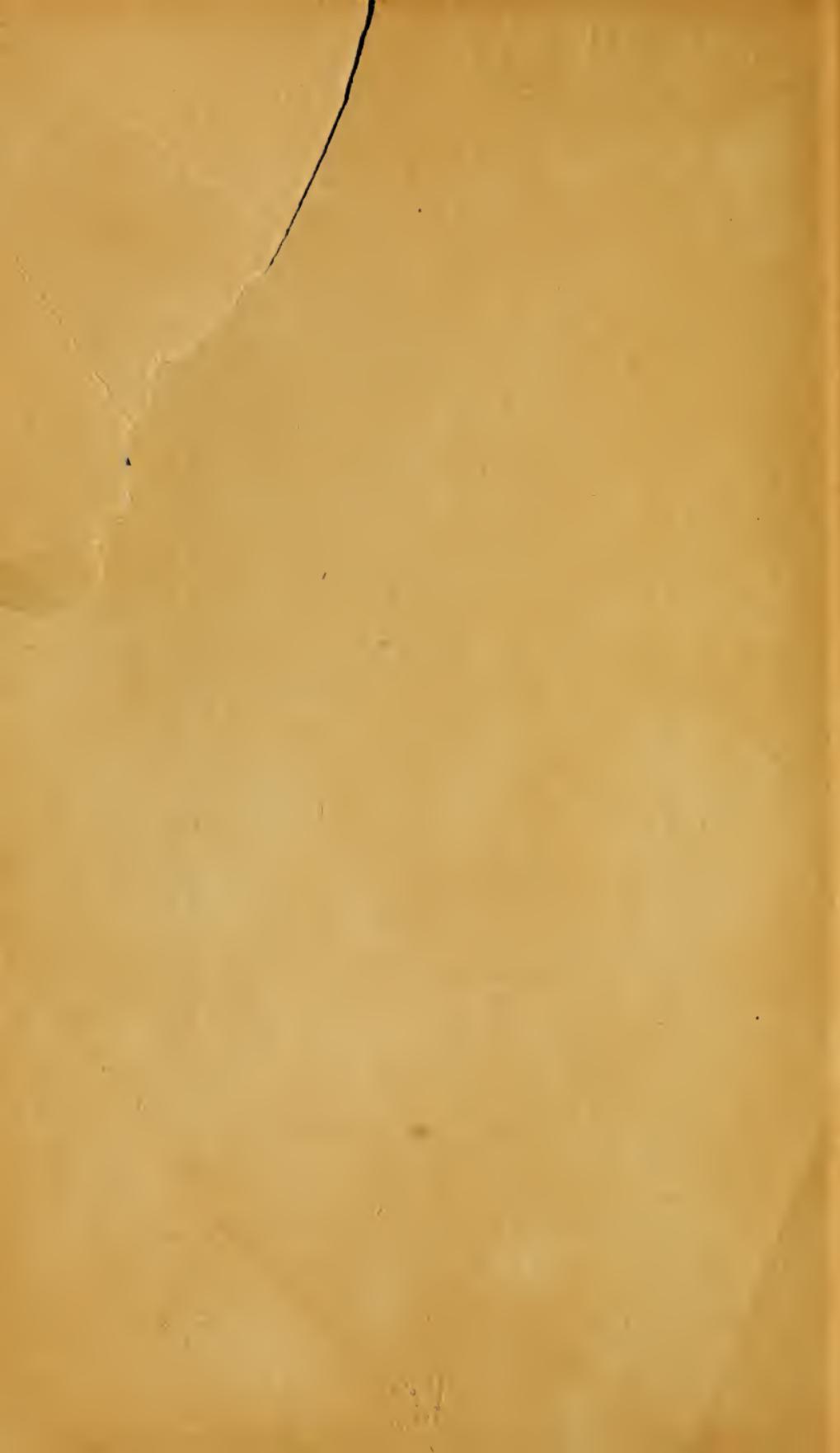
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PREFACE

The story of Ko Ngai is from a collection entitled "A Hundred Examples of Filial Piety," translated from the Chinese by P. Dabry de Thiersant in 1877, and appearing later in Lafcadio Hearn's beautiful short story, "The Soul of the Great Bell." Mrs. Archibald Little also tells it in her book of travel "Round My Peking Garden," quoting at length from the original legend. We find it again in "The Yellow Jacket" in the following lines spoken by the chorus:

"The great bell calls me. The bell-maker cast it of pure gold and silver but its notes proved brazen. The Son of Heaven was supremely annoyed. The bell-maker recast it. When the metal was molten, to save her father's life, for fear its notes would again carry base tones, Ko Ngai, his daughter, disposed of her body by springing into the mass of white heat; so her soul became of the bell wrought by her father. The metal welded with her spirit, and its tone was then one of harmony and love."

In "The Singing Soul" the author has chosen to elaborate on the theme without doing violence to historical facts. The reign of the Emperor, Yung Loh, was noted as an era of peace; therefore, the author feels permitted to attribute to him the qualities indicated in the play, also to introduce other fictitious characters for the sake of the plot. At the same time she wishes to acknowledge her indebtedness to the writers above-mentioned for the inspiration furnished in the writing of the play.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

KWAN YU, a mandarin of the Illustrious Ming dynasty.

TSI MOO
TING LING }
Ko NGAI The mandarin's daughters.

YEN, a servant.

YUNG LOH, Celestially August Emperor of Peking,
Son of Heaven.

PAO CHEN, a student of the stars.

(More characters may be introduced if performed
out of doors, to include a dance by the fire spirits
and the bellsmiths.)

TIME: Five hundred years ago in the flowery
Kingdom. A room in the mandarin's house.

THE SINGING SOUL

A CHINESE LEGEND

SCENE. *Interior of KWAN YU's house in Peking, showing an upper room leading out upon a terrace or balcony which overlooks the courtyard. Exits R. and L. On the walls are Chinese banners, and in the c. a low tea-table with cups and saucers, teapot, a sweetmeat jar, and a vase holding a spray of plum blossoms. On the R. up stage, a teakwood table, on which stand the ancestral tablets of KWAN YU's family, and beside them two lighted tapers, also a jar holding sticks of incense. On the L. a carved seat large enough for two. Further up stage a long mirror resting on the floor, and beside it a bowl of goldfish.*

SCENE I

KWAN YU, TING LING and TSI MOO DISCOVERED when the curtain rises. KWAN YU, the father, is standing at L. before his ancestral tablets; TING LING is kneeling at the R. in front of a long mirror resting on the floor, and arranging flowers in her hair. TSI MOO is also at R. kneeling over a gold-fish bowl feeding the fish)

KWAN YU. (*Taking three sticks of incense and lighting them on the tapers beside the ancestral tab-*

lets) Three times I bow to the tablets of my ancestors and pray the gods may attend me and prosper my work. (*KWAN YU kneels*)

TSI Moo. Our unhappy parent! Seven nights and days has he knelt before the tablets of his ancestors, preparing himself for this fatal hour.

TING LING. (*Turning away from the mirror*) Our honorable parent was a fool to undertake the contract. His ambition will destroy him. A gun-maker turned bell-smith! 'Tis unheard of. Let the shoe-maker stick to his last.

TSI Moo. But think of what he gains if he succeeds! The favor of the emperor, the ruby button and a peacock feather for his mandarin hat. The Son of Heaven has set his heart upon this bell which is to be most wonderful in tone, the sound of it to be heard through the length and breadth of Peking. . . . Our father was a maker of munitions; he won his way to court by moulding firearms that pleased the rulers on the dragon throne in earlier time. But our new emperor is of different mind; he has no taste for conquest, but would live in peace, contented with his books. Therefore, to hold his office and to please Yung Loh, our father rashly undertook the contract. Then to make sure of its success, he advertised for bellsmiths far and wide, skilled in their art; and in the courtyard at our very door, he set this melting pot, where daily he may watch the workers' progress. If luck attends him he has promised me a necklace of jade beads.

TING LING. A jeweled fan I'll choose for mine. Tsi Moo, let us drink our tea. (*They rise and go toward table, where they sit and pour the tea. KWAN YU has risen and is standing at R., where a curtained entrance opens out upon a balcony overlooking the courtyard. He draws the curtain aside and looks out*)

KWAN YU. The men have begun to arrive. At sundown the bell will be cast—for good or ill—as the gods decide. Twice was the metal poured into the waiting mould, but when the bell had cooled, its lips were cracked and fissured with a hundred seams. Silver and gold had gone into the mould, together with iron and brass, for so the Son of Heaven decreed; but, alas, the metals were too far removed, they spurned alliance and refused to mix. Yet the Emperor must be obeyed; for his will is final.

TSI MOO. 'Tis not sweet enough. (*Sipping her tea*) Another honeysuckle leaf for my tea.

TING LING. (*Looking into the jar*) Little pig! Thou hast emptied the sweetmeats jar!

KWAN YU. (*Approaching the table*) My cares lie lightly on their hearts. (*To them*) Where is my little one?

TSI MOO. Our sister, Ko Ngai, went abroad quite early to the house of her singing-master. He is teaching her a new song.

KWAN YU. A new song for my skylark! Let her sing while she may. To-morrow, if I fail, her lips will be mute. Let there be music while the bell is poured; her song shall keep the courage in my breast. (*Turning to the balcony*) I think I see her coming through the gate.

TSI MOO. (*Derisively*) Skylark indeed! A skylark soars up high in air and flings its notes against the blue, and still we hear its song below. But Ko Ngai's voice is small and weak, so tiny you must bend your ear to take it in.

TING LING. A chirping merely, not a singing,—a sparrow in the hedge—

Twittering, twittering, tra la la,
Twittering, twittering, tra la la!

(They both laugh heartily. Ko NGAI appears in the doorway. Her hair hangs low over her shoulders, she carries a samosen and holds a parasol over her head)

TSI MOO. Ssh! Here comes our song-bird!
(Ko NGAI goes at once to her father and touches him lightly on the shoulder)

KO NGAI. (Bowing as she turns) Most august lord and father, a good-day to you!

KWAN YU. (Holding out his hands in welcome) My child, you have stayed too long. I missed your happy presence in the house. Come here to me.
(They sit on the bench at L.)

KO NGAI. The master kept me past the hour to teach me a new song. I told him you were troubled here of late; I wished to learn a tune—a gay and merry one—to drive your cares away. Listen while I sing it for you. (Thrumming her samosen and singing)

“In the land of the wild, white rose,
Where the swift Ho-ang-ho river flows,
I sing while I play
And the hours slip away
In the land of the wild, white rose.”

(During the song the sisters mimic her, beating time with their fans)

TING LING AND TSI MOO. (At the tea-table)
Tweedle-dee, tweedle-dee, tweedledum—

KO NGAI. (To her father, who nods his head approvingly during the song) Is it not a pretty tune? The master says my voice is growing stronger. He has promised that some day I shall go to the palace and sing for the Emperor. (Rising and coming forward with hands clasped) Oh, I want to be a Voice—a ringing Voice—a Voice that

shall sound through the ages! (The sisters burst into loud laughter. Ko NGAI turns to look at them with a grieved expression, then she puts her hands to her eyes, and runs out)

KWAN YU. (*Approaching his daughters angrily*) Let her be! You plague your sister far too much. All day you two sit idly drinking tea, painting your cheeks and lips, while she embroiders storks and pelicans, and sings with every stitch. Out with you! (*Tsi Moo and Ting Ling rise hastily, and exit with their fans to their faces.* YEN enters. *He bears a scroll of yellow silk, printed in red letters, and sealed with the Dragon Seal. Bows and hands it to the mandarin*)

YEN. (*Bowing*) The Celestially August Yung Loh, Son of Heaven, Emperor of Peking, sends this message. (*YEN hands KWAN YU a scroll on yellow silk printed in red letters*)

KWAN YU. (*Reads aloud*) "Twice thou hast betrayed the faith we placed in thee when entrusting to thy hands the making of the great bell. If thou fail a third time to complete the task, thy head shall smile from a bamboo pole. Tremble and obey."

KWAN YU. (*Despairingly*) The Son of Heaven is angry! If I fail to fill the contract, my life will be the price.

YEN. The bearer of the letter moreover informed me that the Emperor is now at the temple offering prayers to Shang-ti the God above, from whence he will come himself to see the deed accomplished.

KWAN YU. (*Agitated*) The Emperor will come here? (*Turning to the balcony*) Make haste that everything be ready. The fires must be lighted and the metals fused.

YEN. Even now the furnace roars. The men

work night and day and rest not, knowing how important is the task. Yet still I fear the outcome. . . . Master, is there nothing lacking in the alloy?

KWAN YU. All has been done exactly as the Emperor ordered.

YEN. But Yung Loh is not an alchemist; what knows he of making bells? There was a wise man at the gate this morning asking to speak with you, but I told him you were at prayers and must not be disturbed. He said the warring metals will not mix till a fifth substance be added.

KWAN YU. (*Impatiently*) These meddling graybeards all would give advice. The formula is thus and so, we cannot change it now. (*Pointing to the tea-table*) Take these away, and make room for the Emperor. (*YEN clears the table and goes out. KWAN YU stares gloomily at the edict in his hand. KO NGAI enters excitedly*)

KO NGAI. Father, a palanquin stops in the courtyard borne by men in the livery of the palace. Do you suppose the Emperor has come to hear me sing? (*KWAN YU silently hands her the message; she reads*) "Your head shall smile from a bamboo pole." You cannot fail! This time the bell must sound!

KWAN YU. I pray it may. In an hour we shall know. I fear the temper of Yung Loh. He has been patient and long-suffering. . . . Oh, that I had not boasted of my skill! (*There is a crash of cymbals announcing that the Emperor is at the door*)

KO NGAI. (*With her arms around KWAN YU*) Father, I feel you trembling. The Emperor must not see you thus afraid, or he will think you have no confidence in your skill. Go upon the balcony while I speak to him.

KWAN YU. (*Hesitating*) But it is not seemly

THE SINGING SOUL

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that you, my daughter, should be left alone with a man, even though he be the Emperor.

KO NGAI. I shall assuage his wrath with my song. (*Leading him out through the door to balcony at L.* KNO NGAI seats herself on the floor beside the bench at L., and takes up her samosen. When YUNG LOH enters, conducted by YEN, she bows her head to the ground three times without rising)

YEN. The Illustrious Emperor Yung Loh would speak with Kwan Yu. (*Exit YEN*)

KO NGAI. Celestially August One, my father shall be notified. He is meditating alone, preparing himself for this hour.

YUNG LOH. (*Regarding her with interest*) You are Kwan Yu's daughter?

KO NGAI. (*Bowing*) Ko Ngai, the youngest of three.

YUNG LOH. Ah! The singing girl whose name is in the mouth of poets! (*Holding out his hand*) Luscious One, I greet you. Rise. (*He helps her to her feet and, seating himself on the bench L., endeavors to draw her down beside him*) Sit here, that I may see you on a level with my eyes.

KO NGAI. (*Holding her fan before her face*) One may not look unafraid into the eyes of the Son of Heaven.

YUNG LOH. Then I shall put a cloud between us. (*Draws a strand of her hair across his face*) How dark the cloud is, and how charged with perfume!

KO NGAI. Does the Son of Heaven look angry behind the cloud?

YUNG LOH. And if he were?

KO NGAI. The fire of his glance would scorch my locks and shrivel them to ashes; but if he smiles, 'twill make them grow like new grass under a spring sky.

YUNG LOH. 'Tis hot behind this cloud. I smother in it. You wear it for a while.

KO NGAI. (*Obeying him*) Is that better?

YUNG LOH. No, I like it less, for now I cannot see your face, though I catch a glimpse of shining eyes, and teeth like rice-pearls gleaming through the lattice. . . . Are you smiling?

KO NGAI. No, no, alas! The cloud is dropping rain.

YUNG LOH. Why do you weep?

KO NGAI. Because the Son of Heaven is angry with my father and threatens his life. Would that I could sing his anger away!

YUNG LOH. You may try, little bird. (*KO NGAI picks up her samosen, and begins to sing*)

"In the land of the wild, white rose,
Where the swift Ho-ang-ho river flows,
I sing while I play
As the hours slip away
In the land of the wild, white rose."

KO NGAI. Does the song please you?

YUNG LOH. I was not listening.

KO NGAI. The Emperor was not listening!

YUNG LOH. (*Leaning toward her*) I was watching your lotus lips. . . . Your cheeks are like the almond blossoms—your breath is incense. . . . (*YEN enters, bowing*)

YEN. (*To KO NGAI*) I seek your honourable father. An old man waits at the gate, the same who came this morning, demanding to be heard. He has a secret formula he would impart to him concerning the casting of the bell, which he says will insure its success.

KO NGAI. Bring him in. (*To the EMPEROR*) A stranger begs an audience, and if he knew your

presence here, fear would tie his tongue. Will the Emperor condescend to absent himself a while?

YUNG LOH. If your visitor stay not too long,—for I have more to say to you. (*YUNG LOH goes out upon balcony. YEN brings in the wise man, PAO CHEN. YEN bows and retires*)

PAO CHEN. I would speak with Kwan Yu.

KO NGAI. He is troubled and must not be disturbed. Let me take the message.

PAO CHEN. You would not understand.

KO NGAI. Transcendingly Wise One, you are a student of the stars who has read my father's horoscope and know the doom that threatens him. But Kwan Yu has no faith in prophets; he relies alone in the cunning of his hands. He will not listen to you. Tell it to me.

PAO CHEN. (*Tracing with his finger on the chart in his hand*) I have consulted the Starry Oracles and the Five Principles of the Universe. I have marked the aspect of the Silver Stream, some call the Milky Way, and followed the Yellow Road marked by the Signs of the Zodiac. . . . And there I read that *the stars are angry with Kwan Yu*.

KO NGAI. The stars are angry with my father?

PAO CHEN. (*Nodding*) They are wroth that he, in his bold ambition, should propose to make a bell of such a mighty tone, that its sound shall reach the skies, and jar the constellations in their spheres.

KO NGAI. Alas! is there no offering we can make—no sacrifice that will appease? A bullock two years old or a ewe lamb my father will place on the altar.

PAO CHEN. The blood of sheep or bullock will not placate them. . . . Yet there is a way to conquer their displeasure.

KO NGAI. OH, tell me by what way?

PAO CHEN. This misbegotten thing which so of-

fends their heavenly ears must be re-made into an instrument of perfect sound, its dissonance changed to heavenly harmonies. . . . *The bell must find a soul.*

KO NGAI. The bell must find a soul?

PAO CHEN. (*Nodding*) A white soul—a singing soul—a soul turned to the Infinite. Kwan Yu must propitiate the stars. (*PAO CHEN bows and goes out at R.*)

KO NGAI. (*Repeating to herself*) The stars are angry. . . . The Emperor was angry, and I sang to him. (*Seizing her samosen and starting toward the door*) I will sing to the stars! (*Shaking her head*) No, 'tis no use! In an hour the bell will be cast—before the sun is set—before the stars come out. And no one knows where they tarry by day. . . . I must go at once and tell my father what the Wise Man has said. (*KO NGAI starts to leave the room at R. but the EMPEROR intercepts her*)

YUNG LOH. Has your beggar gone?

KO NGAI. He was no beggar, but a soothsayer with a warning. The stars are offended with Kwan Yu, that he should dare to make this bell, whose voice will speak so loud that even they must listen.

YUNG LOH. The stars are offended? Then 'tis with me, for I conceived the plan. Your father is but the instrument.

KO NGAI. (*Eagerly*) Then if you willed it, you can still undo it. Give up this daring scheme which mocks the gods, and be content with lesser aims.

YUNG LOH. . . . The bell is my life dream. When I ascended the Dragon throne, young and full of hope, I had a vision of what the world might be if wars should cease. My predecessors all were warrior men who ruled by force of arms; but in my youth I had a teacher, a philosopher, who schooled me in the wisdom of the prophets, preaching gen-

tleness and love. . . . So I resolved ere yet my reign began, to put an end to all this useless strife and sow the seeds of peace throughout the land. I first commanded your father to throw his guns into the melting-pot, and then to make the deed remembered for all time, I ordered him to cast a bell that would resound afar and wide, calling the people together, welding their hearts into one. . . . And on the lips of the bell I would have engraved the sayings of Buddha and the wise ones of all times, extolling the glories of peace. . . . But lest the iron guns should give the bell too harsh a sound, I had it softened with finer metals, deepened with gold, sweetened with silver, strengthened with brass. Thus the bell would become *a mighty Voice,—a Voice ringing down through the ages.* . . .

KO NGAI. (*In an awed tone*) A Voice ringing down through the ages! . . . But why a bell? Why not a man of eloquent tongue to go throughout your kingdom telling of these things?

YUNG LOH. I put no trust in men. Their tongues may lie, but a bell will always ring true.

KO NGAI. Then the work *must* go on?

YUNG LOH. If peace is to come—if wars are to cease.

KO NGAI. And if it fails—my father dies?

YUNG LOH. What the Emperor has decreed cannot be changed. Yet I may delay the task. My reign is young—there are years ahead in which to do the deed.

KO NGAI. Then you *will* put it off?

YUNG LOH. (*After a pause*) On one condition. *That you give yourself as hostage.*

KO NGAI. (*Surprised*) I—a mandarin's daughter—to sit at your side on the Dragon throne? It would frighten the song in my throat.

YUNG LOH. Not on the throne where cares of state engross my mind, but in the palace garden when the day is done. There I would have you,—you and your song.

KO NGAI. (*Delighted*) My wish has come true! I shall go to the palace and sing before the Emperor! . . . Then my voice pleases you?

YUNG LOH. Your voice? Oh, your voice is sweet and delicate—

KO NGAI. (*Disappointed*) *Delicate!*

YUNG LOH. As a wind-bell tinkling in the breeze, but clear as a bird's note. Come to my garden of perpetual spring, and we shall sit together under the banyan tree, waiting for the moon. My garden now is beautiful but mute; it needs a nightingale. Your song will make me forget this dream of kings.

KO NGAI. (*Troubled*) Forget your dream?

YUNG LOH. Why not? Love is for life's morning; these sterner tasks for middle age. Fame shall wait on love.

KO NGAI. (*Hesitating*) But the *peace*—the *peace* that is to be!

YUNG LOH. I shall find it in your arms!

KO NGAI. And the sound of men fighting . . .

YUNG LOH. We shall not hear it—shut in by garden walls.

KO NGAI. (*Earnestly*) Oh, do not give up your dream!

YUNG LOH. (*Coming close to her*) I see a fairer dream before me. My mind is on this hour.

KO NGAI. (*Moving apart*) And mine is on eter-nities. (*Turning quickly toward the balcony*) But I have forgotten my father. (*Leans and looks down upon the courtyard—draws back*) Too late to warn him now. They make ready for the casting. (*Stands irresolute*)

YUNG LOH. (*Eagerly*) There is still time. I will watch the ceremony below in the courtyard. If you take my offer, cast your slipper from the balcony and I will stay your father's hand, ere yet he gives the signal. (*YUNG LOH leaves by the balcony. Ko NGAI stands looking down upon the scene below, while the red light from the furnace fires illumines her face*)

KO NGAI. (*Drawing back—afraid*) How the metals hiss and bubble in the cauldron! The hot lava spurts upward as though to escape the flames which leap to embrace it. . . . How it lashes itself to a frenzy like a creature unsatisfied—seeking that which is lacking. . . . (*With a sudden impulse she removes the slipper from her foot and holds it out in an attitude of supplication*) Ye gods who deny us your sanction,—behold a sacrifice! This token which my heart would cast at the feet of the Emperor I give that the flames may consume it. His love will I forget if you will but bless the task and make his dream of peace a reality. (*Tosses the slipper from the balcony—waits. Resignedly*) 'Tis no use. The gods make no answer. The Wise Man has spoken. The bell must find a soul—a soul in tune with the Infinite. . . . Shall I be a wind-bell blown by every breeze in the Emperor's garden, or shall I be a Voice, a Voice ringing down through the ages? The stars shall be satisfied! (*Ko NGAI turns quickly with arms upraised and leaps from the balcony. There is a hissing sound, followed by the wailing of the crowd as her white body enters the molten mass*)

(*YUNG LOH enters, overcome, with the slipper in his hand, accompanied by PAO CHEN*)

YUNG LOH. I sought to catch her as she leaped

and came away with this. . . . Was it for the dream's sake, or to save her father's head?

PAO CHEN. Her soul went singing to the end, and singing it shall live again in the toning bell.

YUNG LOH. (*With his eyes still on the slipper*) The nightingale is no more! My garden shall remain forever mute.

CURTAIN

JUST PUBLISHED
Nothing But the Truth

A Farcical Comedy in Three Acts

By

James Montgomery
Cast of Characters

Bob Bennett
B. M. Ralston
Clarence Van Dusen
Bishop Doran
Dick Donnelly
Gwen
Mrs. Ralston
Ethel
Mable
Sable
Martha

SCENES

ACT 1. A Broker's Office
ACT 2. Parlor of a Country Home
ACT 3. " "

TIME: The Present

"Nothing But the Truth" is built upon the simple idea of its hero speaking nothing but the absolute truth for a stated period. He bets a friend ten thousand dollars that he can do it, and boldly tackles truth to win the money. For a very short time the task is placidly easy, but Truth routs out old man Trouble and then things begin to happen. Trouble doesn't seem very large and aggressive when he first pokes his nose into the noble resolve of our hero, but he grows rapidly and soon we see our dealer in truth disrupting the domestic relations of his partner. In fact, Trouble works overtime, and reputations that have been unblemished are smirched. Situations that are absurd and complications almost knotted, pile up, all credited to Truth, and the result of the wager to foster and cherish that great virtue from the lips of the man who has espoused the cause of truth to win a wager.

It is a novel idea and so well has it been worked out that an audience is kept in throes of laughter at the seemingly impossible task to untangle snarls into which our hero has involved all those he comes into contact with. It is a clean bright farce of well drawn characters and was built for laughing purposes only.

William Collier played "Nothing But the Truth" for a year at the Longacre Theatre, New York, and it has been on tour for over two seasons.

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